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SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: EDUCATION OFFICIALS EXPRESS SUPPORT FOR COOPERATION, BUT FAIL TO COMMIT TO SPECIFIC PROGRAMS

¶1. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

¶2. (SBU) SUMMARY: Assistant Secretary Richard Boucher's meeting with Turkmenistan's top two education officials successfully presented U.S. views and continued engagement in this area. Unfortunately, it also revealed the continued lack of open dialogue or cooperation in this critical field in Turkmenistan. Boucher also addressed science and religion to no avail in the course of the meeting. END SUMMARY.

ENGAGEMENT, AT LEAST ON THE SURFACE

¶3. (SBU) On April 15, Assistant Secretary Boucher met with Turkmenistan's Deputy Chairman for Education, Health, Science, and Religion, Hydyr Saparlyev, and Minister of Education, Muhammetgeldi Annaamanov. Saparlyev was friendly and talkative, but managed to avoid much substance in the conversation. In response to Boucher's open ended questions about educational reform, Saparlyev reviewed recent major construction projects of new schools and sports facilities, world health day activities, new textbooks, modern technology in the classroom, and the start of graduate programs. Of special note, Saparlyev mentioned the new Public Service Academy which is starting its version of leadership and management training for mid to upper level government officials. Regarding international expertise or assistance in developing new textbooks, Saparlyev talked in broad terms about the process of developing textbooks, noting that the country was meeting the challenge and would have new textbooks covering 100 percent of schools by the start of the next academic year.

¶4. (SBU) Saparlyev shifted the focus to Turkmenistan's hosting of an international academic "Olympiad" in Chemistry. The event is to take place in Ashgabat, April 25-May 2, with high school students representing 19 countries. Saparlyev added that Turkmen students would likely do well. (NOTE: Past experience shows that students from Turkmen-Turkish schools, which have a stronger curriculum than regular Turkmen schools, make up the vast majority of the successful Turkmen students at international "Olympiads." END NOTE.)

DISCUSSION OF SCIENCE AND RESEARCH POLICY

¶5. (SBU) Saparlyev described a new process for competitive research

grants, run under the Supreme Council for Science and Technology. The Supreme Council advertises research themes that will be funded through grants, with various institutions competing for receipt of the grant money. (NOTE: This program is largely modeled on the U.S. system and was inspired by an International Visitors Leadership Program project which sent two Supreme Council officials to the United States. The program started last year initiated grant projects in over sixty different research areas. END NOTE.) Saparlyev listed the various areas of research, including agriculture, energy, and linguistics. Regarding cooperation with the United States, Saparlyev said cooperation was good in all areas, but they need to be programs which obtain results.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

¶16. (SBU) Saparlyev emphasized the freedom of religious practice and the open society in Turkmenistan. He claimed religious organizations did not have any problems. Boucher encouraged Saparlyev to support registration of legitimate religious groups. Saparlyev noted that there is great religious tolerance under Turkmen law, that all procedures are followed properly, and that according to law some types of groups might not be eligible for registration.

DISCUSION OF PROPOSED U.S. PROGRAMS

¶17. (SBU) Boucher noted that the Embassy was ready to work on a variety of educational programs, specifically USAID's Quality Learning Program, University partnerships such as with Texas A&M, and the possibility of a Turkmen Government scholarship program like Kazakhstan's

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Bolashak Program. Saparlyev did not comment on the USAID program. He said there had been a previous partnership with Texas A&M University, but highlighted recent joint educational conferences with Columbia University. Saparlyev referred to the global financial crisis and the expense of sending students to overseas universities.

¶18. (SBU) COMMENT: As the meeting came to a close, Saparlyev expressed his interest in practical proposals from the United States with specific results. Despite the existence of specific U.S. proposals that could yield specific results, Saparlyev was consistent in projecting the image of his openness to new ideas and cooperation with the U.S. while simultaneously avoiding commitment to any specific action. The progress that is achieved (such as the Supreme Council for Science and Technology's research grant program) occurs despite Saparlyev. He makes every effort to appear "on top" of all the issues, despite apparent evidence to the contrary, including his own sometimes self-contradictory remarks. The unanswered question is whether Saparlyev's approach is intentional, reflecting an official state policy or a sign of incompetence. Since Saparlyev's actions appear to contradict the President's official policy on education, Post tends to see this as incompetence. However, active opposition and disruption to U.S. educational programs in Bayramov's Ministry reveal that at least some elements of the government actively oppose U.S. educational programming.

¶19. (SBU) COMMENT CONTINUED: ENGAGING FOR THE LONG TERM - Clearly our programs can pay off -- in the shorter term we see that the International Visitors Leadership Program has inspired a research grant program that may yield improved research efforts. In other efforts directed towards education, we see little short-term progress. But just as what happened following the death of Niyazov, our continued engagement may yield future advances only after possible personnel changes in Turkmenistan's educational structure begin to permit improved cooperation.

¶10. (U) Assistant Secretary Boucher cleared this cable.

MILES